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Oasis
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Screen Readable eBook Version

For Aurora

Who encourages me to write,
even when it's about zombies.

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Thank you.

1: The Last Shift

I heard Donald running down the corridor calling my name, but I didn't care. I just tightened the straps on my backpack kept walking toward the door. In fact, I sped up, hoping to get to the parking lot before he could catch me.

It was no use. For a chubby short guy, he was pretty fast. He caught up to me mere steps from the sliding doors and grabbed me by the arm.

"Hey, Corbin, if I didn't know any better, I'd think that you were ignoring me. I've been yelling the whole way down the hall."

"Huh? Oh, sorry, I didn't hear you. All this overtime you've been giving me must be taking a toll."

"Look, we've got four coming in, severe trauma, some kind of explosion. You know how things have been going in the ER today. We're going to need a couple of extra hands. I'm trying to get a team together before they get here. Dr. Dressel is already getting a suit on."

"A suit? So this is a formal dance?"

"Yeah, didn't I say? We were told there's some kind of biological agent involved."

"Look, Donald, I just finished a thirty hour shift, and you want me to stay longer so I can play with some horribly infectious disease carriers under the direction of the biggest jerk-off doctor in the hospital?"

I must have been raising my voice, because Donald looked shocked. He just stood there with his mouth open and blinked at me.

I was too tired to worry about losing my job.

"Not tonight, friend. This nurse needs sleep." I turned to leave.

That snapped him out of his stupor. "So who am I going to get to come in?"

"Call the twins, they only live like a block from here." I called back as the doors opened for me.

Apparently that idea satisfied him, because he didn't follow me outside.

The sun had already set and the desert air was cooling rapidly. There was no smog and few lights in the city so the stars were plentiful and bright. In the grocery store parking lot across the street the Red Cross had set up three trailers. One still had its lights on and was surrounded by a sizable crowd.

I thought that it was odd for the blood drive to be going on so late, if indeed it was still open. That was also way more people lined up for a blood drive trailer than I'd ever seen in Oasis. I glanced at my watch and saw I had a while until the late bus came, so I decided to check it out.

The three trailers sat just outside the main entrance to The Four Brother's Market where they could inflict the most guilt on customers entering and leaving the store.

Two of the trailers looked like they had seen many blood drives. The paint was peeling in places, dirt clung to every nook and cranny, and the tires were looking more than a little bald. The third trailer was clean, practically sparkling.

As I got closer, I picked up a faint smell of fresh paint. Even the metal stairs that led to the door looked brand new. The light was on inside. A hand-drawn sign on the door explained the reason for the hubbub.

It read, "Today Only, West Nile Virus Vaccination."

Something about the whole deal made my gut churn. I didn't know there was a vaccination for West Nile. After all, I normally keep tabs on that

sort of thing. Why would they do this with the blood drive? What was the deal with the hand painted sign? *I'd have thought they'd do a little more promotion for something as high-profile as the West Nile Virus.*

There were just too many questions, and since I had some time, I just had to find out exactly what was going on. A few flashes of my hospital ID got me through the crowd and to the trailer's stairs.

A middle aged man flung open the door as I reached the bottom step. He gripped his upper left arm like it was going to fall off. As he stepped out, he turned his head back to whoever was inside. His face was red, and his voice was raised and shaking.

"I'm calling the police."

He turned, brushed his arm against the door jam and winced in pain. His eyes darted about the scene as he scrambled to avoid the closing door.

I reached out to help steady the man.

He squinted at me for a split second, then jerked his shoulder away and made a grunting noise that sounded something like, "get off."

The crowd murmured as the man stumbled his way through.

At first I was taken aback by the man's actions. The shock gave way to a burning curiosity. *What could possibly be his problem?* I darted up the steps, caught the still-closing door, and stepped inside.

The scene before me immediately confirmed my fear that this trailer had nothing to do with the Red Cross, or any real medical practice.

Right past the door on one end there was a table, two folding chairs, and a wastebasket. On the other end was a desk and a kitchenette. It smelled as new inside as the outside looked. On the end of the table lay a line of uncapped syringes filled with a brownish substance. The garbage was uncovered and contained a pile of used needles. Two olive-skinned men were scrambling to unload something from the refrigerator into a large cooler. They were so engrossed in their project that they didn't even notice me slip in.

A scream from the parking lot broke their work-induced trance.

Their heads snapped up. The closest man snatched up the cooler. He sprinted straight at me. The other man yelled something in a language I didn't understand.

Before the adrenaline could even hit my veins, I felt myself lurch toward the man.

He had at least fifty pounds on me and a good deal of momentum built up as we collided.

The cooler crunched into my chest.

I groped in the air, but couldn't catch hold of my assailant.

I flew back against the table and landed on the floor. The man kicked open the door and ran through.

The second guy had been right behind him, but stopped as he reached the door. He turned and glared at me lying on the floor. His eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened. He marched straight for me.

The instinct for survival had taken over now. Out of the corner of my eye I spied one of the full syringes, fallen to the floor with the crash. I reached for the needle and sat up.

The second man was now upon me. Time almost stopped for a moment and I saw him draw his right leg back in slow motion. As his kick collided with my stomach, I saw my hand plunge the syringe into his left thigh.

His eyes opened wide. He gasped. The man's fury was replaced with fear.

He staggered back and pulled the syringe out of his leg, then stared at it for a moment and let it fall to the ground. A mumbled prayer or perhaps a curse crossed his lips and he turned to leave. Without a backwards glance he went out into the night.

The crash had knocked the wind out of me, and I struggled to get my

breathing under control. The sharp pain of contact gave way to a dull throbbing in my gut that kept pace with my heartbeat. I rolled forward to my hands and knees. At length I was able to extend the gasps into deeper breaths. My eyes went out of focus and I just plain spaced out for a bit.

The shrill cry of a siren broke my trance. Red and white flashing lights came through the window. The shouting increased from the gathering crowd outside.

Oh, good, an ambulance. Working in the ER, I had gotten used to that siren.

I was still reeling with the impact of it all as I pulled myself up. My legs felt a bit wobbly. As I continued to regain my composure, questions filled my head. What was in those syringes? What were those two unloading from the fridge? What was up with that guy who left as I came in? My stomach and brain were tied up in knots.

I used the door handle for support.

The scene outside was one of morbid excitement. A crowd was gathered around two paramedics helping someone on the ground about halfway to the grocery store entrance. I could pick out bits of commentary from shouts in the crowd.

"I wonder what happened to him?"

"I think he's having a seizure."

"If it's rabies, he'll have to get 35 shots IN HIS STOMACH..."

"He sounds like he's in a lot of pain..."

"That nut job bit me!" cried one man as he forced his way out of the crowd.

My ears perked up and I stood on my toes, trying to follow the bitten man's progress. I lost sight of him in the busy crowd.

When I looked back, the paramedics were pushing a man on a stretcher toward the ambulance.

I wondered what had become of the two others I had seen in the trailer. I scanned around the crowd to see if they had stuck around.

No dice.

As I looked around I caught a glimpse of the man on the stretcher. It was the same man who had stormed out of the trailer. I circled around the crowd so I could get a better view.

I only saw him for a moment as the EMTs loaded him into the ambulance. His face was twisted in a painful grimace. He was moaning quite loudly, and could be heard over the buzz of the crowd. He was strapped down to the stretcher, and thrashing violently in the restraints. It looked as if they could break at any moment. As the doors closed I heard him shout a tortured warning.

"The sssssshot!"

I felt it in my gut just like the kick minutes before. The syringes. I reached for a pants pocket and remembered that I was still in scrubs. I found my cell phone in my backpack and dialed the emergency room.

The receptionist picked up.

"Oasis Medical Center emergency room, how can I help you?"

"Bridgette, its Corbin."

"Great, you want to pick up an extra shift?"

"No. But listen up, there's a guy on his way there right now."

"Are you sure? Because we could really use the help in here."

"Yes, now you need to send someone out here to get a sample of whatever this guy was injected with."

"Yes you're sure or yes you'll come in?"

"Bridgette, I need you to listen."

"And we need at least two more nurses in here."

"I'm already scheduled to be back tomorrow at noon. There's a whole

trailer full of hazardous material over here across the street. Send someone over. It's the new trailer. They were telling people it was a vaccination for West Nile. I gotta get some sleep. Bye."

The adrenalin rush was dipping and I was tired enough that I didn't even feel guilty for hanging up on her. I tried to think of what that brown stuff could have been to cause such a reaction. I tried, but I was just too tired to focus. I needed sleep in the worst way, so I made up my mind to head home and attempt to get it.

As I turned to go, I saw what appeared to be half of the Oasis Police Department swarming into the parking lot. Flashing lights flooded the once dim lot and sirens drowned out the shouts of the crowd. The squad cars formed a loose circle around us. One of the cops produced a bullhorn, and urged us to stay calm, something about a biological threat, and they just needed to escort us to the hospital for a quick screening.

I was not interested in going back to the hospital. The only thing I was interested in was quiet. I just needed to coax a plan from my tired brain.

I came up with a pretty lame one, but I decided to give it a shot anyway.

2: At The Hospital

I headed straight for the officer who looked like he was giving orders and held up my hospital ID.

"Name's Corbin St. Laurent, I'm from the hospital. Are you in charge?"

"I'm a little busy. What do you want?"

"As you get ready to march that group to the hospital, if at all possible separate the ones who have actually been in the trailer."

"Is that all?" Something in the crowd grabbed his attention. He shouted into the bullhorn. "Somebody stop those kids!"

He took a couple of steps toward where the action was happening.

I decided I'd better make it easy for him to send me away. "Oh, and there's a guy who got bitten in that crowd if you can identify him, that would be just..."

"We'll do what we can. No promises." With that, he took off at a jog shouting instructions all the way.

I called after him. "I'm just going to head back and get a biohazard suit, OK?" He couldn't hear me, but some of the surrounding policemen did.

I was a little worried that someone would stop me, but I suppose my show had worked, because no one said anything as I exited the circle of police. I walked briskly in the direction of the hospital, which also happened to be the direction of the bus stop.

With all of the commotion, no one noticed that I didn't go to the hospital. No one noticed that I waited at the bus stop. No one noticed that I got on the bus.

I woke up late to find my bedroom uncomfortably warm. Summer was in full swing a little early, and my apartment on the third floor always caught the full brunt of the morning sun.

I stretched and looked at the clock. I was already half an hour late for work.

I took a two minute shower, scrambled into a clean pair of scrubs, and threw my wallet, phone and jacket into my backpack. I ran out the door and down the stairs. I sprang into the lobby and stopped.

Andy and Tim were already watching TV on the big screen in the lobby. Tim was a dentist that lived on the second floor and had his office down here on the ground floor. He used the big central lobby as his waiting room, and often just sat around talking to folks while waiting for customers to come in. Him, I didn't mind. It was Andy.

I was never quite sure what Andy did for a living, as anytime I'd ever been home in the daytime, he was staring at that TV. He was by far my least favorite neighbor. He also had the not-quite-amazing ability to sense who had entered the room without ever glancing away from the screen.

"Hey Core, is that you? Late for work again, aren't ya buddy? Come check this out, I think these guys are related to you."

A special news broadcast was showing pictures of four Middle Eastern men. The headline on the screen read "Botched Terror Attack." A fashionable blond twenty-something was describing how a cell of terrorists had somehow gotten hold of a biological agent, most likely a virus, it wasn't clear at this time, and were making a bomb. Something went wrong before they could finish, and the bomb had partially exploded, discharging its payload. The terrorists were being cared for in the Oasis Medical Center. The warehouse they had been using was already tented and quarantined.

The picture changed to a reporter in front of the hospital, and several

soldiers were walking by. "The Army has locked down the hospital, we believe to prevent any further terrorist attacks. It is also known that at least two more members of this terrorist cell are at large. They were attempting to spread this virus by giving fake West Nile Vaccinations from this trailer in the grocery store lot across the street." The camera panned around to the trailer I had visited the night before. "If you or anyone you know received an injection here last night, or have any information on the men who gave them, please contact the police."

Andy turned slightly towards Tim, eyes still on the set. "Didn't one of those pictures look exactly like Corbin here?" He always spoke just a little too loudly for comfort.

Tim shrugged and looked at me. "I, I don't think so."

Andy spun around to look at me. I think it was the first time I had ever seen him look away from the television. "Where are you from again? Iraq, somewhere?"

"Montana. We've had this conversation."

"That's crap Core. Nobody up there has skin like yours. I've been, you know. Plus its on TV all the time."

I wanted desperately to bunch up a fist and punch him in the face. Instead, I closed my eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. "My mom was from Spain. My dad's from Montana, where I grew up. He's almost as big a redneck prick as you." I hate it when stuff slips out like that.

"What did you just..." Andy stood, with color rising in his cheeks. I had touched a nerve. He was a pretty big man. I had never really noticed it before, because in the year and a half I had lived in the Millers Crossing Apartments I had only seen him sitting, and in that same couch, too.

I figured I'd better not push my luck, so I just headed for the door.

Between obscenities, I heard him shout, "Don't you leave like that, Mr. Corbin, uh, whatever-your-name-is!"

The television went on about a possible military blockade on the road

out of town.

As I reached for the door, Andy hurled one last comment. "You turn around. Never turn your back on the offensive line. Offense will score a touchdown every time!"

I must admit, I really wanted to stay and figure out just what exactly that was supposed to mean. Instead, I left content with the knowledge that I had finally gotten to him.

The bus was detoured away from the hospital, and dropped me off a block behind the grocery store. That meant I'd be yet another five minutes late.

The scene on the street between the hospital and grocery store was alive with activity. The military had flown in overnight and set up a perimeter of plastic barricades around the hospital. The trailer where I had been kicked had been covered with a plastic tent. The police had taped off the entrance to the grocery store. Reporters, camera crews and onlookers were swarming everywhere, trying to get a handle on the situation.

I was overwhelmed by the sea of activity before me. It seemed like half the town was on the street. What was in those syringes that could have possibly generated this kind of response? I shouldered my way through the crowd and flagged down a guard on the perimeter around the hospital.

I showed him my hospital ID. "I work in the emergency room. Is there any way for me to get in there?"

"No, sir. No one goes in or out."

"Are you sure?"

He just scowled at me until I backed into the crowd.

On some level, that interaction relieved me. *At least I won't be fired for showing up late if I couldn't get in anyway.* I dug around my backpack for my phone and dialed the nurses' desk, then started back through the crowd.

Bridgette was still there. She informed me that the hospital was locked

down by the police about an hour after I had called last night. The military had arrived shortly thereafter and army doctors basically took over the third floor. Everybody that had been infected with the pathogen had been moved there, and hospital staff was no longer being admitted. The doctors who had been treating the victims had told her they were pretty sure it was some type of virus. Before she hung up, she let me know that she thought the whole thing was getting blown way out of proportion, and that she didn't know what all the stink was about.

I felt a little better due to her flippant attitude and began to wonder if the whole show wasn't just a major overreaction. As I mulled the situation over my stomach reminded me that I hadn't eaten yet. I figured there would be no point in arguing with it, so I might as well get some breakfast.

I turned to leave and collided with someone.

She must have been running, because she was knocked flat on her butt.

I stumbled back and bumped into a couple more people.

The girl was cute, and looked really familiar.

I extended a hand. "I'm so sorry. Are you OK?"

"Fine." She smiled. Her brunette ponytail bounced just a little as she got to her feet. "I was just trying to catch you and say how funny it is that we should run into each other here. Then you spun around and... I guess this just makes the joke all the funnier."

I couldn't help but smile back. "I'm still sorry, but, how do we know each other?"

3: It Fell From The Window

She scrunched up her nose. "Back at the U. We were lab partners for the last couple of weeks in chemistry, weren't we? Your name's Corbin, isn't it?"

That's it. Now, what was her name? "Oh yeah, that's right. I mean, yes it is. Are you sure?"

"Are you?"

"I mean about being my lab partner."

"You don't remember me? I'm hurt."

"It was that chem for medicine majors, right?"

"Yep."

"And we had that bald professor that always smelled like fish."

"That's the one. Do you remember me now?" She arched her eyebrows.

"OK. It's not that I don't remember you at all, it's just that I don't remember much about you. I had seven lab partners that semester. There was single dad, angry feminist, the crazy one with the boots, goth girl, pot head, sandwich guy, and the cute one. I'm pretty sure you were either goth girl or the cute one."

"Goth girl or the cute one, huh?" She raised an eyebrow in a mock scold and folded her arms. "What if I'm still the angry feminist?"

"Couldn't be, that was a guy." Something sparked. "Wait a minute, did

you play on the soccer team?"

"So you *do* remember me."

"Yeah, you were definitely the cute one." I smiled again. "I mean you are the cute one."

She rolled her eyes and smiled back. "That was the lamest line I've ever heard. Ever."

I decided to take a chance. "Even so, you want to get some breakfast?"

She lowered her eyebrows and cocked her head. "Oh, I'm sorry. I can't, I'm married now."

"What? Really?"

"Not really. Let's go." She laughed and grabbed my arm. She pulled a little bit, but then turned back. "Um, I guess I don't know where we're going."

I pointed in the opposite direction with my thumb. "This way."

I asked what she had been doing in the area.

She told me she had just finished her morning run and her dad had hauled her there with him. She pointed out two men next to The Four Brothers' Market. They were shouting at a uniformed soldier. She explained that one was her dad, and the other her uncle, and they were two of the four brothers after which the store was named. They were trying to get the authorities to let them open it up again.

"Dad's the one doing less yelling. He's a little less passionate than my uncles." She almost looked embarrassed to say it.

About half a block down sat a tiny café sandwiched between two large office buildings. It had been my favorite since I started working at the hospital. The food was nothing spectacular, but I guess it just felt like I was helping to support the little guy.

The café was empty except for us. I had never seen that happen before. Everybody in the area had swarmed to the hospital to see what was going on.